More Than Half of Students 'Engaged' in School, Says Poll

By Evie Blad

Students who have teachers who make them “feel excited about the future” and who attend schools that they see as committed to building their individual strengths are 30 times more likely than other students to show other signs of engagement in the classroom—a key predictor of academic success, according to a report released Wednesday by Gallup Education.

School leaders should not neglect the social and emotional factors that help students thrive, and they should empower teachers so that they are more engaged and effective in the classroom, says the “State of America’s Schools” report, a synthesis of polling data and research from the international Gallup organization.

“The right leadership and the engagement of teachers and students are all one very important ecosystem,” said Brandon H. Busteed, the executive director of Gallup Education, based in Washington. “Any link broken in that chain, and you’re undermining the importance of an entire school.”

The report comes as America’s schools are working to ratchet up educational expectations to better compete internationally, an emphasis of many state and federal education initiatives.

The stakes are high. In a 2013 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll cited in the report, just 17 percent of respondents agreed that U.S. high school graduates are ready for work, and 29 percent agreed they are ready for college.

A broad focus on testing and new standards can lead schools to neglect the individualized needs of students, the report’s authors say.

“These elements are often overlooked in the effort to ‘fix’ America’s education system, but there is growing recognition that unless U.S. schools can better align learning strategies and objectives with fundamental aspects of human nature, they will always struggle to help students achieve their full potential,” the report says.

From ‘Stuck’ to ‘Hopeful’

Gallup uses an annual 20-question survey, administered online to more than 600,000 students in
districts that volunteered to participate, to determine how students view their school experiences. Participants answer each question on a scale of 1 to 5—with 1 signifying they “strongly disagree” and 5 indicating they “strongly agree.”

Gallup uses responses from three clusters of questions to summarize responses.

In questions related to hope, 54 percent of 2013 respondents were deemed “hopeful” under the analysis, 32 percent were deemed “stuck,” and 14 percent were deemed “discouraged.”

In response to survey items related to engagement—questions about friendships, a feeling of safety, praise for good work—researchers classified 55 percent of students as “engaged,” 28 percent as “not engaged,” and 17 percent as “actively disengaged.”

Emotional engagement at school is the noncognitive factor that most directly correlates with academic achievement, the report says.

In a 2009 Gallup study of 78,106 students in 80 schools across eight states, researchers found that a 1-percentage-point increase in a student’s score on the engagement index was associated with a 6-point increase in reading achievement and an 8-point increase in math achievement scores.

**Schools’ Role**

The new findings highlight how school leaders can influence students’ sense of engagement in learning, Gallup says.

In a finding described by the organization as highly significant, students surveyed in 2013 who said they strongly agreed with two statements—“My school is committed to building the strengths of each student,” and “I have at least one teacher who makes me excited about the future”—were 30 times more likely to be classified as “engaged” than students who strongly disagreed with those statements on the 1-to-5 scale.

To build engagement, districts should encourage students to discover and apply their strengths, Gallup says, and teachers should take a differentiated approach to building hope, focusing on what motivates each student as an individual.

Mr. Busteed provided the example of a 1st grade teacher he once saw on a school tour, who called out the first name and desired future occupation of each student as she called on the student to answer a question.

“It was a simple and powerful action,” he said. “She didn’t need to teach every student something different—she needed to spread different bits of motivation throughout the discussion.”

**Motivating Teachers**

Gallup recommends that principals address teacher engagement to help students succeed.

Teachers’ engagement levels at work are similar to those of the general workforce, according to a 2012 Gallup poll of 70,000 U.S. employees, including 7,200 K-12 teachers. Gallup measures employee engagement through an index that incorporates responses to 12 questions related to feedback, encouragement, and support from supervisors in the workplace. Researchers classified
31 percent of teachers as “engaged” at work under that index, compared with 30 percent of respondents overall.

But, among all occupations tracked in the survey, teachers were the least likely to say that their opinions counted at work.

“If this is pointing toward any improvement we need to make, it’s in the improvement of the leadership of schools,” Mr. Busteed said.

To build engagement among teachers, the report recommends that principals ask them questions about curriculum, pedagogy, and scheduling, and incorporate their feedback into decisionmaking. School leaders should also pair engaged administrators and teachers to collaborate and generate enthusiasm for student-centered projects, the report says. The authors also recommend removing disengaged teachers from the classroom for brief periods of continuing education.

**Message to the Public**

A lack of public understanding of what happens in schools may also contribute to a weak school climate, Mr. Busteed said.

In the 2013 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll, 36 percent of parents of public school students ranked a lack of financial support as the biggest problem schools in their community must deal with. Among less common answers, 4 percent answered that testing and regulations are the biggest problem, and 3 percent said the problem was difficulty finding good teachers.

Mr. Busteed said parents might not understand how educators interact with students on a day-to-day basis, or how school policies affect what happens in the classroom.

A school climate that promotes academic achievement requires engaged students, empowered teachers, encouraging leaders, and a public to hold the system accountable, he said.

“What most of the world thinks of as very soft measures are indeed great drivers of these [achievement] factors that we have focused on so much in education,” Mr. Busteed said.

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